King Lear (BBC, 2018)

Anthony Hopkins must be one of the few people in the world with instantly recognisable wrinkles; the two vertical lines on the left side of his forehead are as much an identifying mark as Liz Taylor's violet eyes. Those wrinkles play star parts in his performance as the BBC's *King Lear* (2018), on a face that carries as much history as the map that he divides in the opening scene.

It's inevitable than any actor's performance should bear the weight of other parts and personal history, and Lear, which an actor usually plays towards the end of his (or for Glenda Jackson, her) career, is more than usually affected by this kind of real-life intertextuality. In 1982, a similarly aged Laurence Olivier played the part for Channel Four, with the actor's own weakened physique and voice, shrunk to childish treble, becoming central tools of the performance.

With Hopkins, the baggage is more personal than professional – a history of depression and alcoholism that kept him intermittently off both stages and screens for nearly ten years, until his masterful returns as Lambert la Roux in *Pravda* and Hannibal Lector in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Hopkins has said, in a line that could have come from *Lear*, that having being an alcoholic is a blessing for an actor 'because wherever I go, the abyss follows me', and his performance, especially at the beginning, carries something of the heavy drinker's capriciousness, turning on a sixpence from humour to fury and back – it's clear from his daughters' shared looks that this was not an easy man to have as a father.

Pravda was also directed by Richard Eyre, who here surrounds Hopkins with a starry, but surprising, cast, so that Emma Thompson, Emily Watson and Florence Pugh, as Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia respectively, cover a wider age range than the three daughters usually do, suggesting a backstory of royal bereavements or divorces, while Andrew Scott is a bookish Edgar and John Macmillan a Machiavellian Edmund – a lesser director would have cast them the other way round. Eyre's television direction is fluid and witty, using techniques – long tracking shots down corridors, direct, conspiratorial address to camera – popularised by shows like *House of Cards* and *The West Wing*, themselves heavily influenced by Shakespeare's histories.

The style is what the scholar Peter Holland has called[i] the 'materialist' school of Shakespearean production; realistic, evocative locations (here including a lot of stately homes), emphasis on naturalistic details, props that reappear at significant moments, and precise character distinctions so that, for instance, Goneril and Albany (an ineffectual, patrician Anthony Calf) are stuck in a sexless marriage, while Regan and Cornwall are adventurers, getting off on the blinding of a cable-tied Gloucester (Jim Broadbent) as if it were the 51st shade of grey.

The milieu is militaristic and macho – many scenes are played before a chorus of camouflage-clad squaddies, so that when Goneril stands before them in a blue dress to berate her father, she sticks out like a butterfly caught in mud. When Oswald (a camp, against-type Christopher Eccleston) gets called a 'base foot-ball

player', it makes perfect sense – these raucous hard men are clearly more the rugby-playing type.

Not everything works – battle scenes are always a weakness in televised Shakespeare; stock footage and offscreen noise, as used here, looks cheap, while a blockbuster CGI-fest, even if affordable, would be missing the point. Some modern parallels are more effective than others – setting the 'poor naked wretches' speech in what looks like a refugee camp seems self-indulgent, trivial in comparison with the much larger real-life tragedy (maybe that was the point). In contrast, the coming together of blind Gloucester and mad Lear (pushing a supermarket trolley, and wearing the hat that belonged to his dead Fool – a Milligan-esque Karl Johnson) among the concrete of a new town shopping-centre works beautifully, giving a new pathos to 'this great stage of fools'.

In the end, Hopkins is the reason for the production's existence, and he seizes the opportunity like a man who can't believe his luck – playful, almost flirtatious at times, occasionally sliding into a Lector-like purr, ranting when he needs to, at other times taking it right down – the climactic 'Howl, howl, howl!' is played not as a cry to the heavens but as a genuine appeal to the stiff-upper-lipped military chorus. Eugene Field once said of an actor in this part that he played the King as if afraid that someone else was going to play the Ace; Hopkins has every single trump card in his hand, and doesn't mind letting you know it.

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[i] Peter Holland *English Shakespeares*; *Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 100.